

The Impacts of the Pandemic on Students' Transfer Journeys

A Technical Report from a Systemwide Study of California Community College Students

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Executive Summary

Over the past five years, the RP Group's <u>Through the Gate</u>¹ transfer study has developed a deeper understanding of how California Community College (CCC) students experience transfer pathways. Specifically, we focused on increasing transfer for "high-leverage" students: those who had completed all or most of the requirements for transfer but had not yet made the transition to university. Our most recent research uncovered key factors impacting students' transfer success, resulting in a new framework for building students' transfer capacity (Cooper et al., 2020).² The framework highlights four issues CCC students grapple with as they work toward their goal of a bachelor's degree: University Affordability, School-Life Balance, Support Network, and Pathway Navigation.

The development of this framework concluded just as the COVID-19 pandemic began. The disruption that followed has raised subsequent questions about how it will impact the educational trajectories of high-leverage students in the short and long term and what new or different supports these students will need to attain their academic goals.

To develop a better near-term understanding of the pandemic's impact specifically for high-leverage learners and to prime future research related to increasing their transfer success, the RP Group conducted a spring 2021 study building on the findings from *Through the Gate* and further exploring students' transfer experiences during this unprecedented period. The study employed a mixed-methods approach. A survey of students identified as having completed at least 45 transferable units as of spring or fall 2020 served as the primary source of data. The survey explored students' experiences as they navigated transfer in the midst of the pandemic. Subsequently, we conducted two virtual focus groups to expand on findings from the survey and gain a deeper understanding of how the transfer process differed for students who successfully transferred and those whose transfer plans changed due to the pandemic.

This technical report summarizes survey responses from 7,894 students representing 67 community colleges (58% of the 115 CCCs invited). It offers a review of students' insights and perspectives organized by the study's five core research questions:

- 1. How were students' transfer plans affected by the pandemic?
- 2. What issues did students who were close to transfer face during the pandemic?
- 3. What did students who were close to transfer know about changes that were designed to support their transfer journey—both in the CCC and university segments—and how did they leverage these changes?

¹ https://rpgroup.org/through-the-gate

² For a Phase 2 summary, see <u>Students Speak Their Truth about Transfer: What They Need to Get Through the Gate</u>

- 4. How are the four factors from the *Student Transfer Capacity Building Framework* currently impacting students' transfer experience?
- 5. What differences exist in student groups' experience of the four factors over the course of the pandemic?

The Pandemic's Effects on Students' Transfer Plans

Nearly two out of five high-leverage students indicated that the pandemic had impacted their transfer plans. Rates were highest among students identifying as nonbinary, Native American/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and students ages 18–25. These impacts varied from changing pathways to delaying plans to canceling transfer plans altogether. Among students who had left their CCC, nearly half indicated that their departure was directly due to the pandemic. Even among students who had been accepted for transfer, nearly one in 10 had either deferred their admission or had decided not to go. While no major differences existed by gender, age, or first-generation status, rates were highest among Middle Eastern/North African students and lowest among White students.

Issues Faced by Students Who Were Close to Transfer During the Pandemic

Nearly two in five high-leverage students found it harder to access counselors and advisors during the pandemic. At both the CCC and university levels, one in three students found it difficult to access transfer center staff. Many students referenced leaving voicemails and sending emails that went unanswered indefinitely. Native American/Alaska Native students were most likely to express difficulty accessing such resources, though Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern/North African students also had a difficult time accessing transfer center staff at the university. Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students had a difficult time accessing transfer websites. With respect to gender, nonbinary students indicated greater difficulty than their male and female counterparts accessing counselors/advisors and transfer workshops/events. In general, older students had a more difficult time accessing transfer resources during the pandemic than younger students.

While students expressed appreciation for the flexibility CCCs showed to meet their needs during the pandemic, some are concerned they will not be prepared for university-level coursework due to the leniency of their courses during the pandemic. This concern was especially present among students in majors involving a lot of hands-on coursework (e.g., nursing, biology, art).

Awareness and Impact of Changes to CCC, UC, and CSU Transfer Requirements

The CCC, California State University (CSU), and University of California (UC) systems each made a number of changes to their transfer requirements in an effort to reduce the likelihood that pandemic-related academic upheaval would derail students' transfer plans. However, the majority of students in this survey (more than two-thirds) were not aware of such changes. Native American/Alaska Native and White students were least likely to know of the changes, pointing to the possibility that colleges made more explicit equity-focused efforts to ensure African-American/Black and Hispanic/Latina/o/x students received this information. Younger students were more likely than older students to be aware of changes made by their CCC, as well as their intended CSU/UC. Further, even among those who did know of these changes, less than one in five students indicated that the changes improved their transfer experience. However, in focus groups and open-ended survey questions, some students voiced that while they did not leverage such changes, it was nice to know they existed as a safety net of sorts.

Changes in the Four Factors Impacting Students' Transfer Capacity

As was found in our original *Through the Gate* research among all student groups, University Affordability was—and remains—most likely to be cited as "very important" when considering transfer. Concerns about University Affordability greatly intensified during the pandemic and are continuing on an upward trajectory as they look ahead. This challenge was mainly attributed to reduced financial stability (e.g., reduced income and/or employment).

Concerns about School-Life Balance also greatly intensified during the pandemic. The increased need to balance school with other responsibilities (e.g., family caregiving, homeschooling children) led to college taking a backseat. While such challenges are trending downward as students look toward the future, they are still much higher than pre-pandemic levels.

The challenges associated with Pathway Navigation and Support Network grew substantially from before to during the pandemic. Yet, as students look to the future, these factors are trending back downward more quickly than University Affordability or School-Life Balance. Issues with both areas centered on communication at both the CCC and university levels. While many of the issues associated with these factors will likely be reduced by the availability of inperson education and services, the challenges of these two factors are still substantially higher than they were before the pandemic.

Group Differences in Students' Experiences of the Four Factors

Students who were no longer enrolled due to the pandemic were more likely to find each of the four factors challenging even before the pandemic. While they also saw larger growth in the

challenges of School-Life Balance, Pathway Navigation, and Support Networking during the pandemic than the general population, this growth was not substantially larger when compared to students who successfully transferred during the pandemic. This suggests that it was not the pandemic itself that resulted in a negative outcome, but rather that students who were already facing barriers to transfer in these areas were not able to weather the increased challenge the pandemic provided.

Nonbinary students consistently experienced the four factors as more challenging than males or females. While relatively small in sample size, the substantial increase in challenges related to transfer that nonbinary students experienced during the pandemic—relative to prepandemic—cannot be overlooked. Further, while females have always been more likely than males to indicate the challenge of each of the factors, gaps between females and males are considerably wider now than before the pandemic, most notably in the area of School-Life Balance.

With respect to race/ethnicity, patterns vary by factor. University Affordability remains very challenging for Hispanic/Latina/o/x students. Middle Eastern/North African students have seen large growth in the challenges of both University Affordability and School-Life Balance. Students who identify their race as "other" have also seen a steady rise in the challenge of School-Life Balance. Lastly, East Asian students have seen a consistent rise in the challenge of Pathway Navigation despite the fact that most other racial/ethnic groups are showing a decline as the pandemic wanes.

First-generation students consistently experienced each of the four factors as more challenging than non-first-generation students. In the areas of Pathway Navigation and Support Network, the gap in the proportion of first-generation and non-first-generation students indicating these factors as a challenge grew slightly from to now. It will be important to ensure attention is paid toward supporting first-generation students in these areas in the coming year.

Lastly, the degree to which students experienced challenges related to each of the four factors varied as a function of age. In general, each of these factors was noted as more challenging over all time points among older students compared with younger students. Looking ahead to the coming year, both students ages 18–25 and 50+ are more likely than ever to indicate that University Affordability is "very challenging" to their transfer progress. In the area of School-Life Balance, although students ages 18–25 initially saw a dramatic rise in the degree to which this factor was a challenge during the pandemic, they are now rebounding quickly in this area. However, older students (ages 26+) anticipate School-Life Balance being more challenging than ever as they look ahead to the coming year. While the survey did not ask respondents about their parental status, it is possible that this variable plays a role in students experiencing challenges during the pandemic. With the federal administration's goal of bringing all K–12 public schools back in person beginning in fall 2021—in conjunction with the potential rollout of the vaccine for younger children around this same time—it will be important to track the degree to which this challenge abates after the fall term.

Looking Ahead

While the immediate threat of the COVID-19 pandemic is waning, the long-term impacts are only beginning to emerge. This report offers a first glimpse into the challenges faced by high-leverage students as they attempted to navigate transfer during the pandemic. It is the hope that these findings will begin to shed light on the supports these students will need immediately and in the long term to remain or get back on track. However, it will be critical to monitor their progress in the coming years to ensure they are equipped with the tools and supports necessary to be as successful, if not more so, than their peers before them and that the ripple effects of the pandemic do not widen equity gaps. In fact, it is the hope that the lessons learned about how to best serve transfer-motivated, high-leverage students can be leveraged to close such gaps—even under the most strained of circumstances.

Introduction

Over the past five years, the RP Group's <u>Through the Gate</u>³ transfer study developed a deeper understanding of how California Community College (CCC) students experience transfer pathways. Specifically, we focused on increasing transfer for "high-leverage" students: those who had completed all or most of the requirements for transfer but had not yet made the transition to university. Phase 1 of the study mapped California's transfer landscape, identifying a continuum of milestones for the student transfer journey and quantifying how many students were "near" or "at" the transfer gate (Cooper et al., 2017).⁴ Phase 2 uncovered key factors impacting students' transfer success, the saliency of each factor for different student groups, and how policy and practice changes might propel them through the transfer gate, resulting in a new framework for building students' transfer capacity (see Figure 1; Cooper et al., 2020).⁵ The framework highlights four issues CCC students grapple with as they work toward their goal of a bachelor's degree: University Affordability, School-Life Balance, Support Network, and Pathway Navigation.

We concluded Phase 2 at the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (herein "the pandemic"), and the year of disruption that followed raises subsequent questions about how it will impact the educational trajectories of high-leverage students and what new or different supports these students will need to attain their academic goals.

Since the onset of the pandemic, both CCCs and universities have implemented policy changes and practice innovations to support the continuation of students' academic pathways. For example, both the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems temporarily adjusted their transfer requirements. Some CCCs

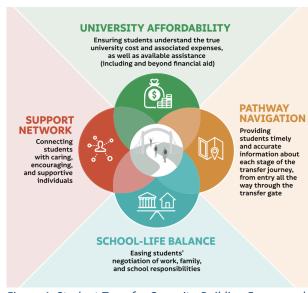


Figure 1. Student Transfer Capacity-Building Framework

prototyped new ways to advance student access to transfer resources in a virtual setting, leveraging web-based solutions and communications platforms to facilitate information

³ https://rpgroup.org/through-the-gate

⁴ Definitions: *Students At the Gate*: Achieved an AD-T or completed the requirements for transfer [≥60 transferable units, ≥2.0 GPA, and transferable English and math], and had not yet transferred; *Students Near the Gate*: Earned ≥60 transferable units with a 2.0 GPA, but missing transferable English and/or math, and had not yet transferred.

⁵ For summary of Phase 2, see Students Speak their Truth about Transfer: What They Need to Get Through the Gate

sharing, offer personalized assistance, and connect students with academic and non-academic supports. Additionally, while not specifically for transfer students, the CCC system made changes to grading policies that could make transfer easier. One such change was the ability to select a Pass/No Pass (P/NP) grading option at any time during the term. Students were also allowed to retake any course attempted during the pandemic without penalty (disregarding the previous grade when computing a GPA once the course had been completed). Additionally, students were able to take an excused withdrawal (EW), which is considered a non-enrollment and does not penalize the student in terms of GPA, academic progress/probation, or the ability to repeat a course.

These changes sought to ensure CCC students could continue making progress toward their bachelor's degree and to stem any decline in transfers. Researchers are now at a point where we can begin exploring transfer patterns in the wake of the pandemic and examining how these changes and innovations are impacting students' transfer success.

Preliminary results are promising. In late 2020, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) reported a 2.6% increase in upward transfer rates from community college to university (Causey, Harnack-Eber, Lang, Liu, Ryu, & Shapiro, 2020). However, not all groups experienced this growth, including African-American/Black and returning students. A follow-up report produced in April 2021 again revealed an overall increase in upward transfer of 3%, with rates highest among transfers to public colleges and female, Hispanic/Latina/o/x, and younger students (Causey, Harnack-Eber, Huie, Lang, Liu, Ryu, & Shapiro, 2021). Conversely, male students displayed a decline in transfer, as did White students. Dishearteningly, this research indicated that more students than ever are transferring without first earning an associate degree.

To understand the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic, the RP Group plans to monitor student transfer patterns and outcomes closely in the coming years. However, certain questions require immediate answers to guide this work. To develop a near-term understanding of the pandemic's impact specifically for high-leverage learners and to prime future research related to increasing the transfer success of this student group, the RP Group conducted a spring 2021 study building on the findings from <u>Through the Gate</u>⁶ and further exploring CCC students' transfer experience during this unprecedented period.

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⁶ https://rpgroup.org/through-the-gate

In This Report

This technical report summarizes survey responses from nearly 8,000 students across 67 California Community Colleges, as well as findings from two subsequent student focus groups. It begins with a description of the methodology followed by an overview of survey participants' demographics. It then offers a review of students' insights and perspectives organized by the study's five research questions and disaggregated by student group—where possible—to identify any equity considerations.

- Research Question 1: How were students' transfer plans affected by the pandemic?
- Research Question 2: What issues did students who were close to transfer face during the pandemic, including their level of access to transfer resources and satisfaction with transfer communication and support both from their community college and university of choice?
- Research Question 3: What did students who were close to transfer know about changes that took place both in the CCC and university segments (e.g., elimination/relaxation of course or admission requirements), and how did they leverage these changes?
- Research Question 4: How are the four factors from the <u>Framework for Building Students' Transfer Capacity</u> currently impacting students' transfer experience, including overall importance of each factor and changes in the degree to which each posed a challenge to their transfer success over the course of the pandemic?
- Research Question 5. What differences exist in student groups' experience of the four factors over the course of the pandemic?

The conclusion underscores the most notable results and offers brief recommendations for acting on these findings.⁷ The RP Group anticipates that individual colleges and their partner universities, as well as system administrators both in and outside of California, will be able leverage these findings to better support students as they work toward completing their bachelor's degree as institutions transition to a post-pandemic world.

⁷ This report is designed to offer detailed survey and focus group data. The RP Group will also produce two complementary briefs leveraging data from both student survey and focus groups, as well as interviews conducted with transfer center professionals representing colleges rated highly by students for their transfer communications and support during the pandemic. These briefs will offer key recommendations for both individual colleges as well as system-level administrators seeking to support high-leverage students.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach that included both quantitative and qualitative data and analyses. A survey in spring 2021 of students identified as having completed at least 45 transferable units as of spring 2020 or fall 2020, regardless of their enrollment status (i.e., current or exited), served as the primary source of data for this project. The survey explored students' experiences as they navigated their transfer journey amid the pandemic. We sent an electronic survey link to Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) representatives at each college, who then identified this population and administered the survey. As an incentive for their involvement, we provided each college with a unique survey link to view their students' responses in real-time via a data dashboard. Further, we entered students who completed the survey into a lottery for one of ten \$50 Amazon gift cards. Ultimately, 7,894 students representing 67 colleges participated (58% of the 115 CCCs invited; a full list of participating colleges is in Appendix A).

Subsequently, a month after the survey data collection concluded, we conducted two virtual focus groups to expand on the findings from the student survey and to gain a deeper understanding of how the transfer process differed for students who successfully transferred and those whose transfer plans changed due to the pandemic. We sent email invitations to a select number of students who completed the survey and indicated they would be interested in participating in a focus group. We applied a stratified random sampling technique to ensure demographic diversity across gender and race/ethnicity. We then selected students to participate in one of two focus groups based on how the pandemic had impacted their ability or plans to transfer. Focus groups were comprised as follows:

- Students Experiencing Transfer Success (n = 7): Students in this focus group indicated they had transferred to a university or were on track to transfer and that the changes that took place at their CCC due to the pandemic improved their transfer opportunities.
- Students with Impacted Transfer Plans (n = 8): Students in this focus group indicated their transfer plans changed due to the pandemic and that the changes that took place at their CCC due to the pandemic did not affect their transfer opportunities.

Each focus group took place via Zoom and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each student received a \$40 Amazon gift card for their participation. We designed focus group questions to gauge student awareness of and access to transfer-related resources and information and to uncover specific factors related to the pandemic that helped or hindered their transfer process. Findings from the focus groups also helped identify the support and resources students currently need to reach their transfer goals and informed the set of recommendations included in this report.

Results

Demographics of Survey Respondents

Table 1 shows:

- 71% identified as female (compared with 54% systemwide)⁸
- 12% identified as either gay/lesbian or bisexual
- Slightly more than 1% identified as transgender

Table 1. Survey Respondents' Demographics by Gender

	%*	#
Gender		
Female	70.5	4,138
Male	27.6	1,619
Nonbinary	1.9	110
Sexual Orientation		
Straight/Heterosexual	79.0	4,775
Gay or Lesbian	3.8	232
Bisexual	8.2	494
Decline to state	6.7	403
Other	2.0	121
Transgender Identity		
Yes	1.1	67
No	95.4	5,704
Decline to State	3.5	208

^{*}Percentages may add up to more than 100% as participants could select "all that apply"

Reader's Note

Research questions in the report are examined holistically as well as broken out by both race/ethnicity and gender.

To be as comprehensive as possible, we present data for all demographic groups. At the same time, given the disproportionately smaller size of some groups (i.e., Native American/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and students with a nonbinary gender identity), we encourage readers to take sample size into consideration when reviewing the findings.

⁸ https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Key-Facts

In general, the racial/ethnic demographics of survey respondents paralleled those of students across the CCC system. Table 2 shows:

- 41% identified as Hispanic or Latina/o/x (vs. 45% systemwide).
- 20% identified as White (vs. 26% systemwide).
- 47% identified as first-generation college students (vs. 43% systemwide⁹).

Most respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25 (58%), with a mean age of 27.4 (see Table 2). For reference, approximately 58% of students across the CCC system are under age 25 and 15% are age 40 or over. ¹⁰ Appendix B includes more information on respondents' demographics.

Table 2. Survey Respondents' Demographics by Race/Ethnicity, First-Generation Status, and Age

Race/Ethnicity	%	#
African-American/Black	5.1	290
Asian - East	5.7	324
Asian - South	3.1	174
Asian - Southeast	6.7	382
Hispanic/Latina/o/x	40.9	2,325
Middle Eastern/North African	2.0	116
Native American/Alaska Native	0.4	23
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0.7	38
Two or More Races	13.3	754
White	20.1	1,141
Other	2.0	112
First-Generation	%	#
Yes	47.3	2,769
No	52.8	3,080
Age (Mean=27.4; SD=9.54)	%	#
18–25	58.2	3,380
26–49	37.6	2,187
50+	4.2	244

⁹ https://ccleague.org/sites/default/files/pdf/state-advocacy/fast_facts_2019_final.pdf

¹⁰ https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Key-Facts

Research Question 1: *The Pandemic's Impact on Students' Transfer Plans*

Students provided information on their current transfer status and whether/how the pandemic affected their transfer plans. Tables 3 and 4 show the following results across the 7,894 students in the sample:

- Close to three-quarters were still enrolled at their CCC (74%).
- Nearly one in five had already transferred to a university (19%).
 - O Among those who had already transferred:
 - 68% were attending a CSU;
 - 16% were attending a UC;
 - 9% were attending an in-state private university; and

47% of exited

students left their CCC

because of the pandemic.

- 7% were attending a university out of state.
- Among the ~540 students who were no longer enrolled at their CCC and had not yet transferred, 47% indicated they left because of the pandemic.

Table 3. Current Enrollment Status

	%	#
I am still enrolled at my community college	74.4	5,872
I am no longer enrolled at my community college but plan to re-enroll in the near future	4.3	337
I am no longer enrolled at my community college and do not know when I will return	2.6	204
I transferred and am attending a university	18.8	1,481

When asked about their current transfer plans, Table 4 shows that, among students who had not yet transferred to a university, 37% were planning to transfer and had already submitted applications to universities, while:

- Nearly one in five students were questioning their transfer plans (19%);
- One in three students were still planning to transfer but had not yet submitted applications to universities (33%); and
- Nearly one in 10 students had already taken the step of applying to transfer but had either been accepted and deferred (7%) or decided not to go (2%).

Table 4. Current Transfer Plans

	%	#
Applied to transfer and got accepted, but deferred	7.1	449
Applied to transfer and got accepted, but decided not to go	1.6	99
Applied to transfer, but did not get accepted	2.1	134
Plan to transfer and have submitted applications to universities	36.9	2,344
Plan to transfer, but have not submitted applications to universities	33.1	2,100
Have not applied to transfer and am unsure of transfer plans	19.3	1,227

As shown in Table 4 above, roughly 9% (n = 548) of students indicated that they had applied to transfer *and* had been accepted but either deferred or decided not to go. While a fraction of the survey sample, the decisions of this population are concerning nonetheless. In exploring more about this group, we learned that 38% (n = 205) had already earned some type of college award (e.g., certificate or degree). Among these 205 students:¹¹

- 45% (n = 93) had already earned an Associate Degree for Transfer (AD-T);
- 57% (n = 117) had already earned an associate degree; and
- 34% (n = 69) had earned a certificate.

When examining students' transfer plans by race/ethnicity, Table 5 shows the following student groups were more likely than their peers overall (9%) and their White peers (6%) to have been accepted for transfer but to have decided to either not go or defer:

- Middle Eastern/North African (16%)
- Native American/Alaska Native (12%)
- African-American/Black (11%)
- Southeast Asian (11%)

There were no major differences by gender, first-generation status, or age in the proportion of students who had been accepted for transfer but decided to either not go or defer.

Further exploration of students' transfer plans revealed that:

- Nearly two out of five students (39%) indicated that the pandemic impacted their transfer plans;
- Nonbinary students (52%) were more likely to report their

39% of students indicated that the pandemic impacted their transfer plans.

¹¹ Percentages add up to more than 100% as students could earn more than one degree or certificate.

transfer plans changed due to the pandemic than the overall population (39%);

- Native American/Alaska Native (55%) and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students (57%) were more likely to report their transfer plans changed due to the pandemic than the overall population (39%);
- There were no major differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students with respect to the proportion whose transfer plans changed due to the pandemic; and
- Students ages 18–25 (44%) were more likely than students ages 26–49 (38%) or students age 50+ (39%) to indicate that their transfer plans changed due to the pandemic.

 Table 5. Pandemic's Impact on Transfer Plans

	Applied to Tra Accepted, Deferred or Do	but Either ecided Not to	Transfe Change to the Pa	ed Due
	%	#	%	#
Race/Ethnicity				
African-American/Black	11.3	27	36.9	52
Native American/Alaska Native	11.8	2	54.5	6
Asian - South	9.4	13	30.0	24
Asian - Southeast	11.3	35	38.5	65
Asian - East	8.8	23	25.5	35
Hispanic/Latina/o/x	8.1	153	44.5	522
Middle Eastern/North African	15.6	15	36.7	18
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	9.7	3	56.5	13
White	6.4	58	37.0	198
Other	10.8	10	30.0	18
Two or More Races	8.2	49	44.6	160
Gender				
Male	9.7	123	37.5	291
Female	8.2	266	41.5	847
Nonbinary	6.7	6	51.9	27
First-Generation Status				
First-Generation	9.7	219	42.0	575
Non-First-Generation	7.7	190	39.3	591
Age				
18–25	9.5	253	44.0	603
26–49	7.7	138	38.4	494
50+	5.3	12	38.9	70
All Students*	8.7	548	39.0	1,508

^{*}The "All Students" total does not equal the sum of the individual groups, as it does not include individuals who declined to state their race/ethnicity and/or gender.

Research Question 2: *Issues Faced by Students Close to Transfer During the Pandemic*

While Research Question 1 sought to determine which students' transfer plans changed as a result of the pandemic, Research Question 2 sought to determine some of the variables that impacted these changes. An open-ended survey question for students who indicated that their transfer plans changed due to the pandemic (n = 1,447) sought to better understand why their plans changed. Below we offer the most common answers and sample quotes.

• Financial issues and needing to focus on meeting basic needs securities (30%):

When the pandemic hit, my financial situation grew worse. I was beginning to reach

my final classes before transferring as a computer science major, and I had to make the conscious decision to put my transferring to CSU on hold and obtain my associate degree at [my community college] to immediately enter the workforce to stabilize my future living situation within two years.

 Difficulty learning in an online environment and/or preference for face-to-face learning (22%):

Being at home makes it hard to get most things done because of the lack of equipment that the campus provides and the assistance from . . . staff members or classmates. Another thing is the experience of being at a campus that makes you feel as if [you're] living your dream—the college life, so to say—and the [CCC] community is always there for you and never has a closed door.

• Delays in their ability to complete coursework, including unavailable classes (17%):

When asked which factors related to the pandemic caused their transfer plans to change, students' top three were:

- Financial issues and needing to focus on meeting basic needs securities;
- 2. Difficulty learning in an online environment or preference for face-to-face learning; and
- 3. Delays in ability to complete coursework, including unavailable classes.

I am pushing back my transfer plans by one year because the rest of the classes I need to take are lab classes. The virtual lab classes do not work for me and they are something I feel need to be taken in person to truly understand the learning material.

 Struggles maintaining a school-life balance/managing competing home priorities (9%):

Having a child at home while doing homeschooling is difficult. My transfer plans have to wait until my child goes back to in-person learning.

• Issues navigating the transfer pathway (9%):

I actually missed the deadline to transfer this year—spring 2021. It's hard when you can only contact your counselor online (if and when they are available). I wish emails were sent or [that I] would have been contacted.

• Not wanting to pay university tuition if classes were going to be online (7%):

I am still considering whether or not to transfer, but if classes are online for the Cal State I am wishing to transfer to, I may not attend because it is too much money for me to attend when I do not get much out of online classes due to being an art major.

Issues regarding stress and mental health (4%):

I got into a really bad depression and anxiety. My mental health wasn't good at all. I was enrolled in 3 classes during fall semester and couldn't successfully [finish] them. Online learning was too much to handle for me, I wasn't really learning. I took two classes during spring semester: half was face to face, and I loved it but I barely made it at the end of the semester. Unfortunately, those grades greatly affected my GPA overall. So I decided to take a break from school and not apply to transfer as I was supposed to.

• Setbacks directly related to the virus—self/family members having COVID or worried about exposure to it (4%):

My entire family got infected with COVID-19. My dad, who helped me financially, passed away with [COVID]. I had to take less units because I needed to find work to support myself because I no longer had my father's help. [I was] also grieving, which demotivated me a lot.



Student Focus Group Spotlight

These open-ended survey question findings were supported by what students shared in focus groups. Students who recently transferred or were close to transferring reported numerous challenges as they transitioned to remote instruction, most often related to competing priorities and disengagement. These same issues were most prevalent in a statewide survey of CCC students across the state that we conducted in spring 2020.¹² However, high-leverage students noted an additional challenge: concern over the decreased level of rigor of online

¹² Statewide COVID-19 Impact Surveys of Students and Employees Spring 2020 Results

instruction. Many students reported that they preferred inperson instruction, especially for certain classes, making the transition to remote instruction challenging. Students expressed fears that they had not actually learned the course material and would be unprepared when they transferred to a university. They worried that they would be less knowledgeable than past transfer students because of open-book exams and relaxed course requirements during the pandemic. Additionally, students in more traditionally hands-on programs (e.g., nursing, biology, art) indicated lacking hands-on skills because lab courses were either not offered remotely or were not equivalent to what would be available in person. In the words of one student focus group participant:

"When we were [in person] we were learning more. I'm afraid if I transfer to a new school, am I going to be ready? Am I going to be as knowledgeable as the students [who transferred before] the pandemic? It's kind of scary for me. I feel like I am not learning as much as I have to."

I haven't learned anything [in online classes]. I haven't done any of my labs like anatomy, physiology, and microbiology . . . we're doing our exams open book . . . it isn't good, and I'm not happy.

Survey participants provided information regarding their access to transfer-related resources during the pandemic. Many students found it harder to connect with transfer supports—such as counselors and advisors, CCC transfer center staff, transfer workshops and events, and university transfer center staff—during the pandemic compared with before the move to remote learning. At the same time, a small subset found these resources easier to access.

Table 6 shows:

- More than two in five students found it harder to access counselors and advisors during the pandemic than before (43%).
- Students found it harder to access transfer workshops and events (28%), transfer center staff at the university (32%), and transfer center staff at the CCC (35%).
- Across each of the transfer-related resources, 8–16% of students indicated they had an easier time accessing these resources during the pandemic than before.

Table 6. Access to Transfer-Related Resources During the Pandemic

	Harder to Access Now Than Before		No A		Easier to Access Now Than Before		Did Not Try/ Do Not Know	
	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
Counselor/advisor	43.1	2,647	27.8	1,707	16.1	987	13.1	804
Transfer center staff at the CCC	34.9	2,139	25.3	1,549	9.5	580	30.4	1,865
Transfer center staff at the university	31.6	1,937	22.2	1,361	8.3	509	37.9	2,320
Transfer workshops/events	27.6	1,691	24.0	1,471	15.0	916	33.4	2,045
Transfer website	17.1	1,049	43.3	2,653	11.7	714	27.9	1,712
Other online resources (e.g., ASSIST.org)	20.1	1,226	44.2	2,696	13.4	820	22.3	1,364

When examining access to resources by student demographics, Table 7 shows:

- Native American/Alaska Native students had a more difficult time accessing the majority of transfer-related resources relative to their peers.
- Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern/North African students had a more difficult time accessing transfer center staff at the university. Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students had a more difficult time accessing transfer websites.
- Nonbinary students indicated greater difficulty than their male and female counterparts accessing counselors and advisors and transfer workshops and events.
- There were no major differences in students' ability to access transfer resources by first-generation status.
- In general, older students (50+) had a more difficult time accessing transfer resources during the pandemic relative to younger students (18–25).

Table 7. Proportion of Students Finding Transfer-Related Resources Harder to Access During the Pandemic by Demographic

		Counselor/ Advisor		Transfer T Center Staff at the CC		Transfer Center Staff at the University		Transfer Workshops/ Events		nsfer osites
	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
Race/Ethnicity										
African-American/Black	41.0	119	33.4	96	30.6	88	26.3	76	16.3	47
Native American/Alaska Native	47.8	11	43.5	10	39.1	9	34.8	8	21.7	5
Asian - South	36.8	64	39.9	69	34.3	59	29.5	51	20.1	35
Asian - Southeast	43.8	167	36.5	139	36.9	139	30.9	117	18.1	69
Asian - East	45.0	145	34.2	110	29.2	94	27.3	88	13.0	42
Hispanic/Latina/o/x	43.8	1,015	34.7	804	31.9	739	26.6	616	18.3	425
Middle Eastern/North African	40.5	47	37.1	43	41.7	48	31.9	37	18.3	21
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific										
Islander	26.3	10	34.2	13	34.2	13	28.9	11	26.3	10
White	43.2	492	34.5	392	30.4	345	28.2	320	16.0	181
Other	42.0	47	33.9	38	32.1	36	29.5	33	20.5	23
Two or More Races	43.5	328	34.1	257	30.3	228	25.0	188	15.2	114
Gender										
Male	38.9	629	33.0	534	29.7	481	28.6	463	15.4	249
Female	44.3	1,828	35.4	1,458	32.2	1,325	26.8	1,101	17.6	727
Nonbinary	56.4	62	38.2	42	33.6	37	32.7	36	20.2	22
First-Generation Status										
First-Generation	44.3	1,224	36.4	1,004	34.3	946	30.3	835	19.8	546
Not First-Generation	42.1	1,293	33.7	1,033	29.5	906	25.4	777	14.9	455
Age										
18–25	43.6	1,473	34.2	1,152	30.8	1,036	25.8	869	14.8	498
26–49	42.4	925	36.0	783	33.2	721	29.7	645	20.2	440
50+	42.7	103	38.3	93	34.3	83	33.6	81	24.2	58
All Students*	43.1	2,647	34.9	2,139	31.6	1,937	27.6	1,691	17.1	1,049

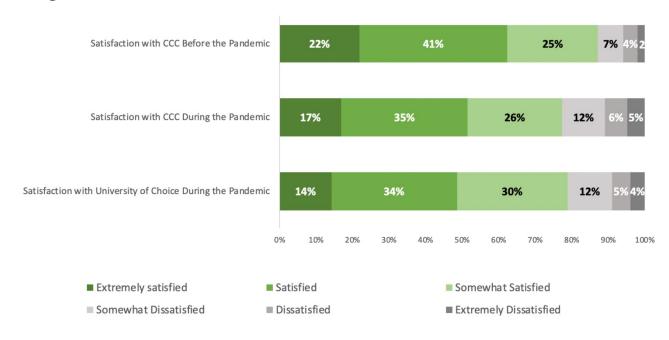
^{*}The "All Students" total does not equal the sum of the individual groups, as it does not include individuals who declined to state their race/ethnicity, age, and/or gender.

Difficulty accessing transfer-related resources during the pandemic parallels the change in students' overall satisfaction with CCC transfer communication and support. Figure 2 shows:

- Over three-fifths (62%) of students reported being at least "satisfied" (41%) or "extremely satisfied" (22%) with CCC transfer communication and support before the pandemic. During the pandemic, 51% indicated they were either "satisfied" (34%) or "very satisfied" (17%).
- The level of satisfaction survey participants had with their CCC during the pandemic paralleled their satisfaction with their university of choice; nearly half of students

indicated being either "satisfied" (34%) or "extremely satisfied" (14%) with the communication and support from their university of choice.

Figure 2. Satisfaction with CCC and University Transfer Communication and Support Before and During the Pandemic



Research Question 3: Awareness and Impact of Changes to CCC, CSU, and UC Transfer Requirements

The CCC, CSU, and UC systems all implemented changes to transfer requirements for CCC students during the pandemic. They made these adjustments in an effort to ensure that any upheaval in students' academic plans as a result of the pandemic did not completely derail their transfer progress. Survey questions sought to determine what students knew about the changes implemented in the CCC and university segments (e.g., elimination/relaxation of course or admission requirements) and how they were leveraging these changes.

More than two-thirds of students were unaware of any changes to transfer requirements made by the CCC, CSU, or UC systems.

We asked survey participants about their awareness of the changes at both their CCC¹³ (e.g., acceptance of certain letter grades to meet transfer requirements) and/or their CSU or UC of choice¹⁴ (e.g., acceptable grades or courses), as well as the degree to which such changes impacted their transfer opportunities (if they knew about them). As Table 8 shows, over two-thirds of students were unaware of any changes to transfer requirements made by either the CCC (32%) or CSU/UC systems (26%).¹⁵

Table 8. Awareness of Changes in Transfer Requirements Made by the CCC and CSU/UC Systems

		of Changes by CCC	Made by	of Changes CSU/UC of oice
	%	#	%	#
Yes	31.6	2,034	25.5	1,642
No	68.4	4,409	74.5	4,800

¹³ Find specific information on CCC changes detailed in <u>Temporary Suspension of Various Specified Grade-Related</u>
Regulations to Address the Continuity of Education in Community Colleges During the COVID-19 Declared State of <u>Emergency</u>.

¹⁴ Find specific information on CSU changes outlined at https://www2.calstate.edu/apply/freshman/Pages/community-college-guidance-incoming-transfers.aspx, and for the UC at https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/response-covid-19.html.

¹⁵ While most changes to transfer requirements were made at the CCC, CSU, and UC system levels, questions were phrased as "at my community college" and "'at my CSU/UC of choice" (a) in the event the student did not realize changes were systemwide, and (b) to account for any inter-college differences in changes to transfer requirements.

Among students who *did* know about such changes, few indicated that these adjustments at either the CCC (13%) or CSU/UC (15%) levels improved their transfer opportunities. Over a third of students were unsure of how changes at the CCC (36%) or CSU/UC (35%) impacted their transfer prospects, as displayed in Table 9.

Table 9. Impact of Changes in Transfer Requirements Made by the CCC and CSU/UC Systems

	Impact of Made	_	Impact of Changes Made by CSU/UC o Choice		
	%	#	%	#	
It improved my transfer opportunities	12.9	261	15.3	251	
It hurt my transfer opportunities	6.4	130	10.2	167	
I am not sure how it affected my transfer opportunities	35.6	722	35.3	578	
It did not affect my transfer opportunities	45.1	914	39.1	640	

Note: %s may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Students who indicated that changes made by the CCC helped them were most likely to credit the reduction in stress due to the relaxation of requirements—notably the ability to request an excused withdrawal (EW) at any point, which allowed them to be flexible in determining whether or not they would need it. While many did not end up using it, they indicated that simply knowing it was an option was beneficial, as described by three students in open-ended survey responses that follow.

Among students who knew about the changes to transfer requirements, less than one in five indicated that the changes at either the CCC or CSU/UC levels improved their transfer experience

I fell behind on schooling during the transition to online classes and didn't want to get a failing grade, which would greatly impact my GPA. With an excused withdrawal, I was able to collect myself during the transition and retake the class I needed for transferring.

[The EW option] made me feel supported by my campus and allowed me to appreciate the options I was given. The in-person to remote learning switch made me feel powerless in my academic journey, but this opportunity gave back a feeling of control.

Among students who indicated that changes made on the CSU/UC end helped them, they were most likely to credit the reduction in stress that came with no longer needing to submit standardized test scores and the ability to include more Pass/No Pass courses on their transcripts. Sample open-ended responses included:

They allowed some classes to be taken [Pass/No Pass], which helped for classes I was getting low grades in due to the transition to online learning.

These changes improved my transfer opportunities to the university of my choice because usually those two things really affect the admission process of whether you get accepted or rejected. I'm usually not good at taking the ACT and SAT, so that saved me.

It gave me another chance to take those classes again the next semester (fall 2021), so I was grateful that it did not impact my GPA to transfer.

Breaking down awareness of CCC and CSU/UC changes by gender reveals that males (28%) and nonbinary students (27%) were less likely than females (33%) to be aware of changes made by their CCC. There were no substantial differences in awareness of changes made at the CSU/UC level. With respect to race/ethnicity, Table 10 shows the following:

"[The changes in requirements] allowed me to stay in my classes for longer before deciding to drop. [It] takes longer than a couple of days to understand whether or not a class is a good fit online. And the excused withdrawal also sometimes allowed us to still get a refund later in the semester, so it didn't feel like a punishment to drop a class and do what was best for my GPA."

- South and Southeast Asian students (48% and 43%, respectively) were most likely to know about changes to transfer requirements made at the CCC level. Native American/Alaska Native (22%) and White (24%) students were least likely to know about such changes.
- South Asian (41%) and Middle Eastern/North African (40%) students were most likely to know about changes to transfer requirements made at the CSU/UC level. Native American/Alaska Native (17%) and White (19%) students were least likely to know about such changes.
- There were no major differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students with respect to their awareness of changes to transfer requirements made by their CCC as well as their CSU/UC of choice.
- Students ages 18–25 were more likely than older students to be aware of changes made by their CCC (35%) as well as their CSU/UC of choice (29%) relative to students age 50+ (23% and 18%, respectively).

Table 10. Awareness of Changes in Transfer Requirements by Race/Ethnicity

		nanges Made	Aware of Changes Made			
	by	CCC	by CSU/U	C of Choice		
	%	#	%	#		
Race/Ethnicity						
African-American/Black	35.9	104	32.8	95		
Native American/Alaska Native	21.7	5	17.4	4		
Asian - South	48.3	84	40.8	71		
Asian - Southeast	43.3	165	35.6	136		
Asian - East	36.2	117	31.8	103		
Hispanic/Latina/o/x	32.0	743	25.5	593		
Middle Eastern/North African	45.2	52	39.7	46		
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	44.7	17	21.1	8		
White	23.7	270	18.8	214		
Other	33.9	38	25.9	29		
Two or More Races	26.7	201	20.8	157		
Gender						
Male	28.3	457	24.2	392		
Female	32.6	1,346	25.9	1,068		
Nonbinary	25.5	28	22.7	25		
First-Generation Status						
First-Generation	33.8	933	26.7	737		
Not First-Generation	29.0	892	24.3	748		
Age						
18–25	34.7	1,170	29.0	979		
26–49	27.1	591	21.0	459		
50+	23.1	56	18.0	44		
All Students	31.6	2,034	25.5	1,642		

^{*}The "All Students" total does not equal the sum of the individual groups, as it does not include individuals who declined to state their race/ethnicity and/or gender.



Student Focus Group Spotlight

Student focus groups revealed there may be some misunderstanding among students of how excused withdrawals (EWs) and Pass/No Pass (P/NP) grades affect GPA and how universities perceive students who took advantage of the grading flexibility. For example, some students were under the impression that a Pass would be viewed the same as a C and therefore opted for the letter grade. Further, students noted that not all universities and/or majors within universities changed their transfer requirements. Students pointed out that the grading changes were more prevalent among the public universities, thus those transferring to private

universities may not have taken advantage of options such as the P/NP grade. For example, one student shared how nursing schools did not relax their transfer requirements in the same way as the CSU and UC systems. One student explained:

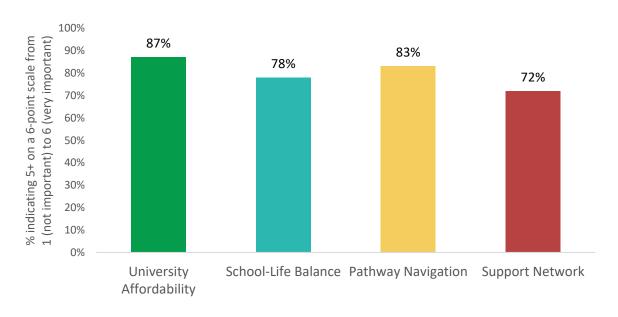
I was aware of the Pass/No Pass option. My college did a good job in spreading awareness of that information, but I chose not to use it because I've been passing with all A's. I heard someone say that if I use that option, it's the same as putting a C on your transcript . . . so I was aware of the option, but I chose not to use it.

Research Question 4: Changes in the Four Factors Impacting Students' Transfer Capacity

The RP Group sought to determine how the four factors identified in the Student Transfer Capacity Building Framework impacted students' transfer experience pre-pandemic, during the move to remote instruction, and in their current context. We asked students numerous questions related to the importance and challenge of each of the four factors: University Affordability, School-Life Balance, Pathway Navigation, and Support Network (see Figure 3).

Survey respondents rated how each factor impacted their overall transfer experience (regardless of the pandemic) on a six-point Likert scale, with one being "not at all important" and six being "very important." The majority of students rated all four factors as important to their transfer experience. Students were most likely to report that University Affordability was important (87%). Though students were least likely to report that access to a Support Network was important in impacting their transfer experience, 72% students still indicated that it was important.





Breaking out the results from Figure 3 by student demographics in Table 11 reveals:

- The following student groups were most likely to indicate the importance of **University Affordability**: Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students (95%), Hispanic/Latina/o/x students (91%), first-generation students (91%), nonbinary students (90%), female students (90%), and students ages 26–49 (89%).
- The following student groups were most likely to indicate the importance of **School-Life Balance**: Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students (87%), first-generation students (85%), students ages 26–49 (84%), Hispanic/Latina/o/x students (82%), and female students (82%).
- The following student groups were most likely to indicate the importance of **Pathway Navigation**: Students of other races (87%), Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students (87%), first-generation students (85%), and female students (85%)¹⁶.
- The following student groups were most likely to indicate the importance of having a **Support Network**: students of other races (81%), students age 50+ (79%), Hispanic/Latina/o/x students (78%), Southeast Asian students (77%), first-generation students (77%), and female students (75%).

¹⁶ There were no substantial differences in the importance of Pathway Navigation by age.

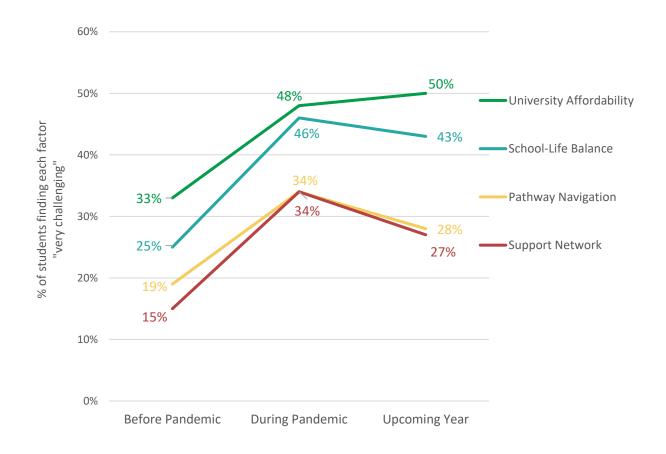
Table 11. Students' Ratings of the Importance of Each Factor to Their Transfer Experience by Demographic Group

	University Affordability		School-Life Balance		Pathway Navigation		Support Network	
	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
Race/Ethnicity								
African-American/Black	89.9	258	79.5	229	83.6	241	76.3	219
Native American/Alaska								
Native	78.2	18	78.2	18	78.2	18	73.9	17
Asian - South	79.5	136	75.3	131	81.6	142	70.6	123
Asian - Southeast	86.9	326	77.2	292	86.3	328	76.8	292
Asian - East	84.4	270	78.2	251	82.5	265	70.7	226
Hispanic/Latina/o/x	90.9	2,097	82.0	1,901	86.2	1,997	77.6	1,798
Middle Eastern/North								
African	83.4	95	78.2	90	85.9	98	68.5	78
Native Hawaiian/Other								
Pacific Islander	94.6	35	86.5	32	86.9	33	73.0	27
White	84.1	956	72.5	824	78.8	896	63.8	726
Other	86.6	97	79.5	89	87.4	97	81.2	91
Two or More Races	86.9	654	76.8	578	80.7	608	66.7	503
Gender								
Male	82.3	1,324	71.9	1,158	80.6	1,299	65.9	1,062
Female	89.7	3,678	81.3	3,348	85.0	3,500	75.1	3,093
Nonbinary	89.9	98	76.0	82	73.4	80	67.9	74
First-Generation Status								
First-Generation	90.6	2,488	82.6	2,278	85.1	2,346	76.5	2,110
Not First-Generation	84.8	2,593	74.8	2,291	82.1	2,517	68.8	2,109
Age								
18–25	86.5	2,901	74.7	2,515	83.8	2,818	70.5	2,370
26–49	89.3	1,935	83.9	1,828	83.4	1,819	74.6	1,628
50+	87.5	211	81.2	194	82.9	200	79.1	189

Below, Figure 4 shows student responses to questions regarding the relative challenge of each factor to their transfer experience pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and now as COVID-19 evolves:

- University Affordability is of increasing concern to students as they consider transfer: 33% rated it as "very challenging" pre-pandemic, 48% during the pandemic, and 50% anticipated it will be a significant issue for the upcoming year. In fact, this factor is the only one of the four that students do not see becoming less of a challenge as they look ahead to the coming year.
- University
 Affordability is the one factor students do not see recovering post-pandemic.
- Students are also worried about School-Life Balance: while 25% rated it as "very challenging" pre-pandemic, 46% shared it was "very challenging" during the pandemic and 43% anticipated it will remain this way for the upcoming year. Though trending downward, the proportion of students continuing to express this concern is notable.

Figure 4. Changes in the Proportion of Students Rating Each Factor as "Very Challenging"



Research Question 5: Differences in student groups' experience of the four factors over the course of the pandemic

While it is critical to gain a holistic picture of how students experienced each of the four factors over the course of the pandemic, our previous research has documented that students vary in the degree to which each factor poses a challenge to their transfer journey based on different demographic characteristics. Thus, we sought to explore more deeply how different student groups experienced the challenge of each factor and how that challenge changed from before the pandemic, to during the pandemic, and as they look ahead to the coming year.

Breaking the data out by students who indicated that they were no longer enrolled due to the pandemic ($n = ^2250$), students who were still enrolled in their CCC ($n = ^44,850$) and students who successfully transferred during the pandemic ($n = ^11,230$), Table 12 reveals:

- Students who were no longer enrolled due to the pandemic rated each of the four factors as significantly more challenging for them during the pandemic than students who were still enrolled. However, they were also more likely than stillenrolled students to indicate that each of the four factors were challenging even before the pandemic, and they saw larger growth in the challenges of School-Life Balance and access to a Support Networking during the pandemic.
- Students who successfully transferred during the pandemic were less likely to rate
 each of the four factors as "very challenging" before the pandemic, though they also
 saw slightly larger growth in the challenge of each factor relative to students who
 were still enrolled.

Table 12. Challenge of Four Factors Over Time by Enrollment and Transfer Status

	Students No Longer Enrolled Due to the Pandemic (n = ~210)			Still Enrolled Students (n = ~4,850)			Students Who Successfully Transferred During the Pandemic (n = ~1,230)		
	% Pre-	% During	% Pt	% Pre-	% During	% Pt	% Pre-	% During	% Pt
	Pandemic	Pandemic	Increase	Pandemic	Pandemic	Increase	Pandemic	Pandemic	Increase
University									
Affordability	45.2	57.9	+12.7	34.5	48.6	+14.1	26.0	41.4	+15.4
School-Life									
Balance	29.8	57.2	+27.4	25.2	45.8	+20.6	22.1	46.4	+24.3
Pathway									
Navigation	24.5	42.6	+18.1	18.8	33.8	+15.0	16.2	32.2	+16.0
Support									
Network	22.7	47.4	+24.7	15.0	33.0	+18.0	11.7	33.6	+21.9

Notes: (1) Percentages refer to the percentage of respondents who indicated that the factor was "very challenging"; (2) The table does not present data for students who were no longer enrolled but did not indicate that their exiting was due to the pandemic.

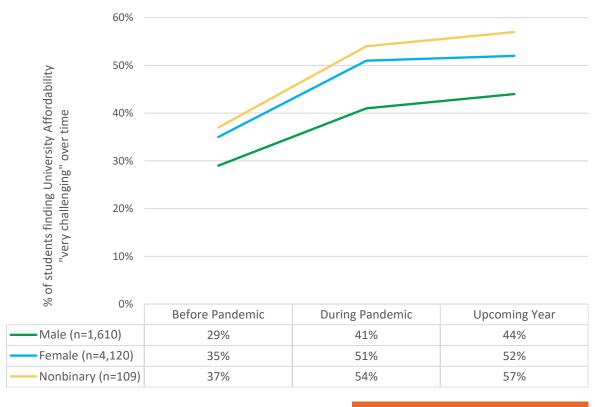
The following section presents data on the degree to which students of different demographic groups rated each of the four factors as "very challenging" to their transfer journey and how that rating changed over the course of the pandemic. Results are first broken out by gender, followed by race/ethnicity, first-generation status, and age. Student voices amplified through the focus groups and open-ended survey responses offer additional insight into how students experienced each of the factors during the pandemic.



UNIVERSITY AFFORDABILITY

Among students of all genders, the proportion rating University Affordability as "very challenging" has increased since before the pandemic, and all students anticipate it will continue to be a significant challenge in the upcoming year. Female students and nonbinary students have consistently rated this factor as more challenging than males (see Figure 5).

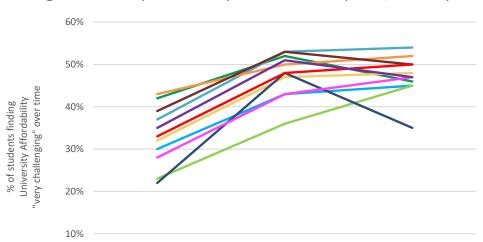
Figure 5. Changes in Student Concerns about University Affordability Over Time and by Gender



Results also revealed some noteworthy changes over time in the proportion of different racial/ethnic groups reporting University Affordability as an acute concern. Figure 6 shows that: Looking toward the upcoming year, Hispanic/Latina/o/x and Middle Eastern/North African students were most likely to anticipate that University Affordability will be a "very challenging" factor with respect to their transfer capacity.

- **Before the pandemic:** African-American/Black and Middle Eastern/ North African students were most likely to indicate that University Affordability was "very challenging" to their transfer progress.
- During the pandemic: While all student groups saw a rise in the proportion identifying University Affordability as a challenge during COVID-19,
 Hispanic/Latina/o/x and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students were most likely to indicate this factor was "very challenging;" Native American/Alaska Native students particularly reported a sharp increase in this area during this period of disruption.
- In the upcoming year: Hispanic/Latina/o/x and Middle Eastern/North African students were most likely to anticipate that University Affordability will be "very challenging" to their transfer success. Native American/Alaska Native students seem less concerned about this issue looking forward.

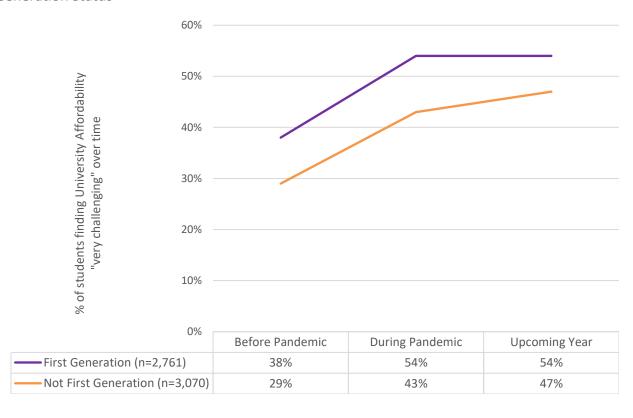
Figure 6. Changes in the Challenge of University Affordability Over Time and by Race/ Ethnicity



0%				
9/3	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic	Upcoming Year	
African American/Black (n=290)	42%	52%	46%	
Asian - South (n=174)	30%	43%	45%	
Asian - Southeast (n=382)	32%	47%	48%	
Asian - East (n=324)	23%	36%	45%	
Hispanic/Latina/o/x (n=2,325)	37%	53%	54%	
Middle Eastern/North African (n=116)	43%	50%	52%	
Native American/Alaska Native (n=23)	22%	48%	35%	
Native Hawaiian/Other PI (n=38)	39%	53%	50%	
Two or More Races (n=754)	33%	48%	50%	
	28%	43%	47%	
Other (n=754)	35%	51%	47%	

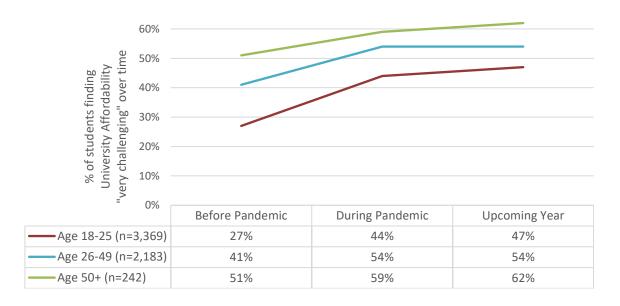
Breaking findings out by students' first-generation status reveals that first-generation students were consistently more likely to indicate that University Affordability was "very challenging" to their transfer progress. The gap between first-generation and non-first-generation students before the pandemic (nine percentage points higher for first-generation students) has narrowed slightly, to seven percentage points as students look ahead to the upcoming year. (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Changes in the Challenge of University Affordability Over Time and by First-Generation Status



Breaking findings out by students' age reveals that older students were consistently more likely to indicate that University Affordability was "very challenging" to their transfer progress relative to younger students. However, students ages 18–25 saw the largest rise in the percentage indicating that University Affordability was "very challenging" to their transfer progress from before the pandemic to during the pandemic. As they look ahead to the coming year, both students ages 18–25 and students age 50+ are more likely than ever to indicate that University Affordability is "very challenging" to their transfer progress (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Changes in the Challenge of University Affordability Over Time and by Age





STUDENT VOICES

Despite the fact that survey participants rated University Affordability as the greatest challenge to their transfer success pre-pandemic and that their concerns about this issue have only intensified, focus group participants were less likely to reference this challenge in open discussion than other factors. Instead, they were more likely to tout the benefits of basic needs resources and other financial stability supports such as subsidized materials costs and campus food pantries during tight financial times. Two students noted in focus groups:

If you were in certain classes like my art classes, they gave us sketchbooks. You showed your student ID and they handed out sketchbooks and different materials for certain classes. They did stuff like that for a couple of semesters, which was pretty nice.

Transfer students should utilize the campus resources. Students don't know they are actually paying for the resources on campus that are part of their tuition. Definitely use resources such as the free food pantry or financial aid or tutoring. Those really helped me a lot.

However, some participants more explicitly addressed the increased financial strain related to the pandemic and the need for more information and support regarding financial aid at the university. One student noted in a focus group:

I know for a lot of students a top decision on whether they transfer [depends on if they can] afford the tuition costs. Especially with the pandemic, parents [may have] lost their jobs or are in financial crisis . . . if [universities] have more emphasis on [financial aid and scholarships], it will make students feel more comfortable in attending a university.



SCHOOL-LIFE BALANCE

Among students of all genders, the proportion rating School-Life Balance as "very challenging" to their transfer success has increased since the beginning of the pandemic and remains high as students look towards the upcoming year. Female and nonbinary students have consistently rated School-Life Balance as more challenging than males, though nonbinary students saw the sharpest rise in this challenge during the pandemic. At present, the gap between males and females is nearly double pre-pandemic rates, while looking ahead, nonbinary students are much more likely than both male and female students to indicate that School-Life Balance is a "very challenging" factor as they consider transfer (see Figure 9).

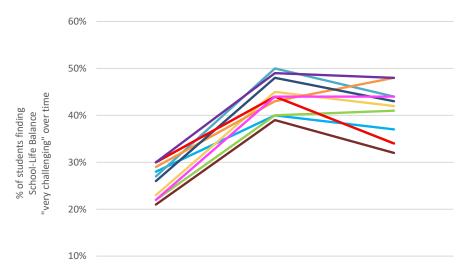
Figure 9. Changes in the Challenge of School-Life Balance Over Time and by Gender



Figure 10 shows with respect to race/ethnicity:

- Before the pandemic: African-American/Black students, students of two or more races, and students who identified their race/ethnicity as "other" were most likely to indicate that School-Life Balance was "very challenging" to their transfer progress in the period prior to the pandemic.
- Over the course of the pandemic, Middle Eastern/North African students have seen a continuous rise in the degree to which School-Life Balance is "very challenging" to their transfer decision-making.
- During the pandemic: All groups saw a sharp rise in the proportion identifying School-Life Balance as a challenge. Hispanic/Latina/o/x students and students who identified their race/ethnicity as "other" were most likely to indicate that this factor was "very challenging" to their transfer experience.
- In the upcoming year: Middle Eastern/North African students and students who identified their race as "other" were most likely to anticipate that School-Life Balance will continue to be "very challenging." Nearly all racial/ethnic groups indicate that this challenge has diminished somewhat from the peak of the pandemic to now, as they look ahead to the coming year. Middle Eastern/North African students report it is more problematic than ever. East Asian students were the only other group to foresee School-Life Balance being more of a challenge in the upcoming year than before.

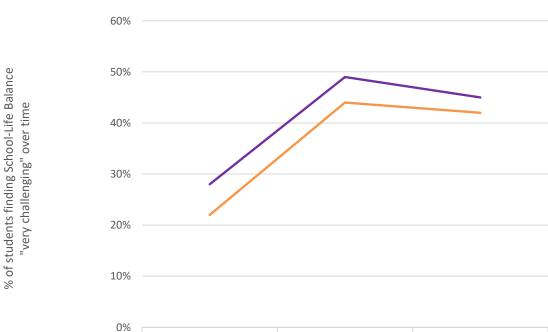
Figure 10. Changes in the Challenge of School-Life Balance Over Time and by Race/Ethnicity



0%	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic	Upcoming Year	
African American/Black (n=290)	30%	44%	34%	
Asian - South (n=174)	28%	40%	37%	
Asian - Southeast (n=382)	23%	45%	42%	
Asian - East (n=324)	22%	40%	41%	
Hispanic/Latina/o/x (n=2,325)	27%	50%	44%	
Middle Eastern/North African (n=116)	29%	43%	48%	
Native American/Alaska Native (n=23)	26%	48%	43%	
Native Hawaiian/Other PI (n=38)	21%	39%	32%	
Two or More Races (n=754)	30%	44%	34%	
White (n=1,141)	22%	44%	44%	
Other (n=754)	30%	49%	48%	

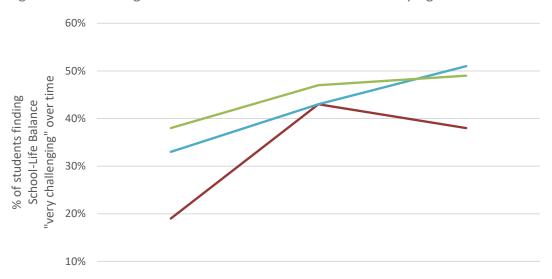
Breaking findings out by students' first-generation status reveals that first-generation students were consistently more likely to indicate that School-Life Balance was "very challenging" to their transfer progress relative to non-first-generation students. Both first-generation students and non-first-generation students saw a steep rise in the percent of students indicating that School-Life Balance is "very challenging" to their transfer progress from before the pandemic to during the pandemic. At present, first-generation students are three percentage points more likely than non-first-generation students to indicate that School-Life Balance is "very challenging" to their transfer progress, compared to a six percentage point gap before the pandemic (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Changes in the Challenge of School-Life Balance Over Time and by First-Generation Status



Breaking findings out by student age reveals that students age 50+ and students ages 26–49 were much more likely than students ages 18–25 to indicate that School-Life Balance was "very challenging" to their transfer progress before the pandemic. The proportion of students ages 18–25 indicating that School-Life Balance was "very challenging" to their transfer rose steeply during the pandemic, to the same level as those ages 26–49. As students look ahead to the coming year, those age 18–25 are less likely to project that School-Life Balance will be "very challenging" to their transfer progress than they were during the pandemic, whereas students age 50+ and—most notably, students ages 26–49—are more likely to project this factor to be more challenging than ever (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Changes in the Challenge of School-Life Balance Over Time and by Age



0%	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic	Upcoming Year
——Age 18-25 (n=3,369)	19%	43%	38%
——Age 26-49 (n=2,183)	33%	43%	51%
——Age 50+ (n=242)	38%	47%	49%



Sentiments shared by student focus group participants regarding the increased challenge in maintaining School-Life Balance paralleled survey results. Many students indicated they work full-time while going to school. Some also reported managing parental responsibilities, which has been harder with daycares shut down and limited access to childcare. College took a backseat as students assumed more responsibilities at home, such as caregiving for family members and homeschooling children.

Students said managing their personal lives and academic workload has been challenging, even without caregiving duties. Students described the burden of navigating issues at home and learning in a remote environment, all while trying to maintain their physical and mental well-being. Some students reported working more hours due to the pandemic, while others shared that they had been laid off and are struggling financially to meet basic needs.

Students who said they were able to successfully balance school and life responsibilities noted implementing explicit strategies to address this issue. They highlighted the importance of making time for breaks, self-care, and relaxation. One student noted in a focus group:

Take care of yourself—like, your mental well-being and your physical well-being. Just your overall health in general because sometimes you get distracted with school, work, and life, and you don't notice the changes. So, I think that taking care of yourself is a huge reminder.

Some students adjusted their schedule, having certain days to focus on class and other days to attend to personal responsibilities. Students who were not used to personally managing such a busy schedule underscored the importance of organization tools such as whiteboards, calendars, and sticky notes to stay organized and keep from getting overwhelmed.

Among students of all genders, the proportion indicating that Pathway Navigation was "very challenging" to their transfer success increased from the period before the pandemic to its peak during the pandemic, and it is now trending back downward. Female students experienced the sharpest increase in this issue from before to during the pandemic. Females are five percentage points more likely than males to project that Pathway Navigation will be "very challenging" in the coming year, compared with a two percentage point gap between females and males before the pandemic. Further, at all three points in time, nonbinary students were much more likely than both male and female students to indicate that Pathway Navigation was a "very challenging" factor as they consider transfer (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Changes in the Challenge of Pathway Navigation Over Time and by Gender

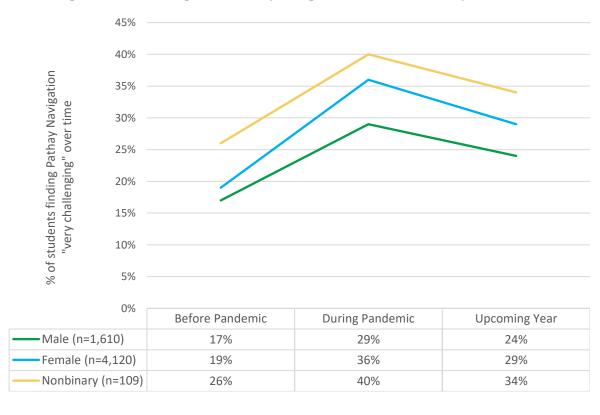
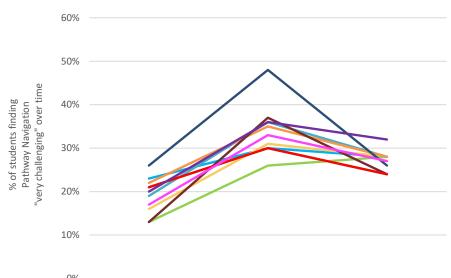


Figure 14 shows with respect to race/ethnicity:

- Before the pandemic: Native American/Alaska Native students were most likely to indicate that Pathway Navigation was "very challenging" to their transfer experience.
- During the pandemic: All groups saw a sharp rise in the proportion of students identifying Pathway Navigation as "very challenging." Native American/Alaska Native students were most likely identify this factor as a significant obstacle (with a rate far surpassing the all-student rate: 48% vs. 32%).
- The proportion of East Asian students reporting Pathway Navigation as "very challenging" to their transfer experience has steadily increased since pre-COVID and continues to rise looking ahead to the coming year.
- their race/ethnicity as "other" were most likely to indicate Pathway Navigation was "very challenging." While East Asian students were least likely to indicate that Pathway Navigation was "very challenging" prepandemic, the proportion of students in this group reporting this issue as a significant obstacle to their transfer journey has steadily increased and continues to rise looking ahead to the coming year. It is important to note that East Asian students are the only racial/ethnic group to demonstrate this pattern of a continuous rise in perceived challenge.
- Native American/Alaska Native students were more likely than students of other racial/ethnic groups to indicate that Pathway Navigation was "very challenging" both before and during the pandemic, yet they appear more hopeful about this factor in the coming year than many other racial/ethnic groups.

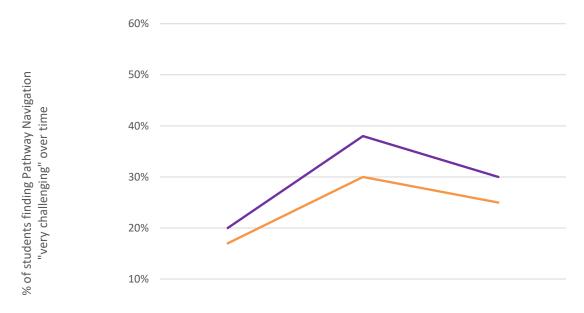
Figure 14. Changes in the Challenge of Pathway Navigation Over Time and by Race/ Ethnicity



0%	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic	Upcoming Year
African American/Black (n=290)	21%	30%	24%
Asian - South (n=174)	23%	30%	28%
Asian - Southeast (n=382)	16%	31%	28%
Asian - East (n=324)	13%	26%	28%
Hispanic/Latina/o/x (n=2,325)	19%	36%	28%
Middle Eastern/North African (n=116)	22%	35%	28%
Native American/Alaska Native (n=23)	26%	48%	26%
Native Hawaiian/Other PI (n=38)	13%	37%	24%
Two or More Races (n=754)	21%	30%	24%
	17%	33%	27%
Other (n=754)	20%	36%	32%

Breaking findings out by students' first-generation status reveals that first-generation students were consistently more likely to indicate that Pathway Navigation was "very challenging" to their transfer progress relative to non-first-generation students. The percentage of first-generation students indicating that Pathway Navigation was "very challenging" to their transfer progress rose more steeply from before the pandemic to during the pandemic than for non-first-generation students. Looking ahead to the coming year, first-generation students were five percentage points more likely than non-first-generation students to project that Pathway Navigation will be "very challenging" to their transfer progress, compared with a three percentage point gap before the pandemic (see Figure 15).

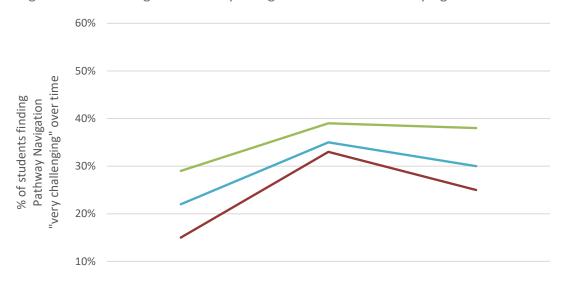
Figure 15. Changes in the Challenge of Pathway Navigation Over Time and by First-Generation Status



0%			
070	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic	Upcoming Year
First Generation (n=2,761)	20%	38%	30%
——Not First Generation (n=3,070)	17%	30%	25%

Breaking findings out by students' age reveals that older students (50+) were consistently more likely to indicate that Pathway Navigation was "very challenging" to their transfer progress relative to younger students. However, students ages 18–25 saw the largest rise in the percentage of students indicating that Pathway Navigation was "very challenging" to their transfer progress from before the pandemic to during the pandemic. As they look ahead to the coming year, students ages 18–25 and 26–49 were less likely than during the pandemic to indicate that Pathway Navigation will be "very challenging" to their transfer progress compared to students age 50+ who do not project this challenge to diminish much in the near future (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Changes in the Challenge of Pathway Navigation Over Time and by Age



0%	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic	Upcoming Year
——Age 18-25 (n=3,369)	15%	33%	25%
——Age 26-49 (n=2,183)	22%	35%	30%
——Age 50+ (n=242)	29%	39%	38%



Focus groups and open-ended survey responses revealed that students who experienced challenges with Pathway Navigation noted issues with limited communication on both the CCC and university sides. Students shared they felt "on their own" with respect to finding transfer information. Students indicated there were many documents required by universities (e.g., financial aid, transcripts) that they struggled to access through their CCC due to campus closures and/or that they did not know when to submit the documents. Counselors were sometimes there to assist, but students had to figure out how to set up a virtual meeting, which took time, and even then, appointments were not always available. A student noted in an openended survey response:

Back when I had to get my transcripts from my community college, it was a lot harder. [The college] was completely closed, so you had to navigate the website. I didn't know [the website] very well . . . and I didn't really have a counselor to talk to because then I would have to figure out how to make an appointment online, and it was a whole ordeal with that. Maybe some differences to their websites [would be helpful], just to make everything a little more organized with step-by-step instructions.

Even once accepted for transfer, students shared they struggled to know what to do next. They explained that the university had sent them very little information after they received their acceptance letter. Students reported that universities sent emails but no clear guidance on what needed to be done or what to expect in the coming year (e.g., whether or not orientation would be in person or online). Some students described attempts to navigate university websites with minimal success locating needed information. Two focus group students noted regarding the lack of communication on the university end of the transfer process:

There has not been that much communication during the transfer process. Just emails like, "Your transcript was accepted," but it didn't tell me anything else to do, yet I know there's more stuff that I had to complete and turn in. . . . It would have been nice to get some kind of weekly update.

I just got out of the transfer process. I applied, and I got accepted, and through the whole process I had trouble knowing what next steps to take. After applying, it was like, "What do I do?" [The university] didn't have a good website to show you steps: "Here's step one, step two, step three." There are so many different documents that they need between financial aid and your transcripts and making sure you're signed up for orientation. There were so many different things and factors [and] I didn't know if I had each one completed. I didn't know what to email to [the university], and all I was getting was just random emails about different steps that were all out of order, and it was really hectic.

Students who were able to successfully navigate their transfer path indicated that they relied on their community college for help and attended virtual transfer sessions for guidance on next steps in the process. Students also reported feeling more confident and informed when they were able to confer with family members and friends who had been through the transfer process or who worked at a university; these individuals helped them know next steps and/or facilitate connections at the university. Further still, some students acknowledged specific programs that were supportive, such as Puente, which helped facilitate a connection with university counselors to assist with the transfer process. One student noted in a focus group:

Because of that connection [between the Puente program and the university] they connected us to transfer counselors at [the university], so I was actually able to meet with a counselor and go through my transfer plan and receive some confirmation that everything was fine. So in that way, they helped me a lot.



Among students of all genders, the proportion indicating that accessing and receiving support was "very challenging" to their transfer experience rose from the period before the pandemic to the height of the pandemic, though is now trending back downward. Nonbinary students reported the sharpest increase in this challenge during the pandemic. Looking ahead, nonbinary students are more likely than both male and female students to indicate that access to a Support Network is a "very challenging" factor as they consider transfer.

Figure 17. Changes in the Challenge of Support Network Access Over Time and by Gender

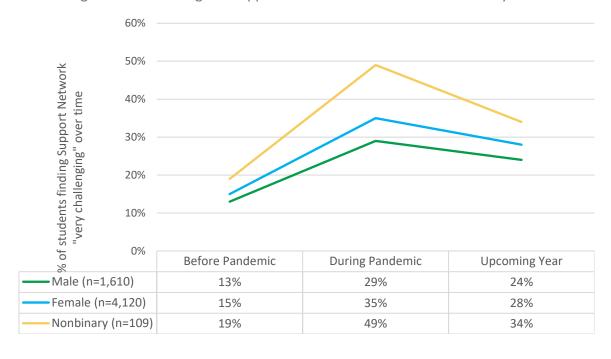


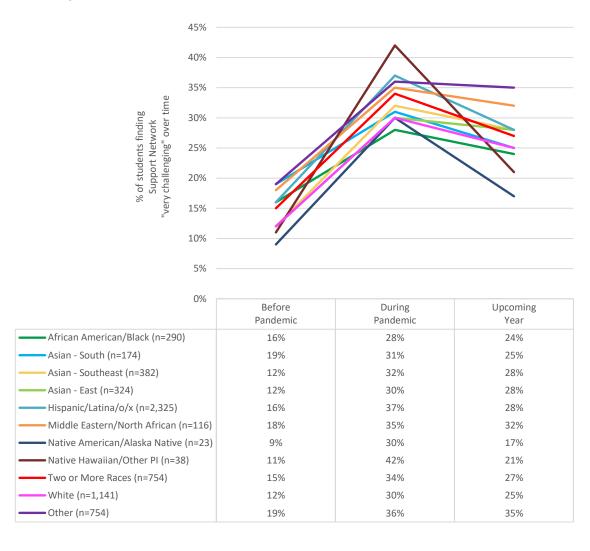
Figure 18 shows with respect to race/ethnicity:

- Before the pandemic: Students who identified their race/ethnicity as "other" were most likely to indicate that finding a Support Network was "very challenging" to their transfer progress.
- During the pandemic: All groups saw a sharp rise in the proportion identifying accessing Support Network as a challenge. Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and Hispanic/Latina/o/x students were most likely to indicate that accessing a Support Network was "very challenging" to their transfer success during this period.

Students who identified their race/ethnicity as "other" anticipate that accessing a Support Network will be as challenging in the coming year as it was during the pandemic.

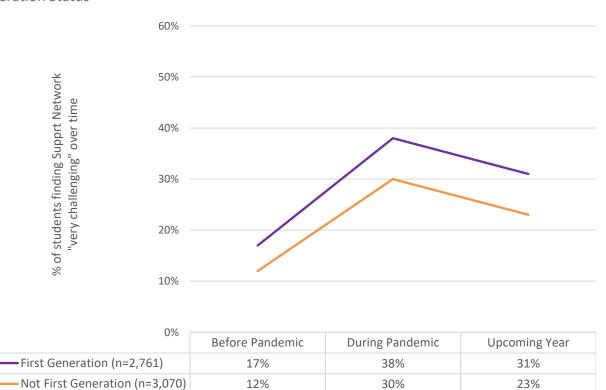
- In the upcoming year: Students who identified their race/ethnicity as "other" and Middle Eastern/North African students were most likely to indicate that accessing a Support Network will be "very challenging" to their transfer experience in the coming year; in fact, students who identified their race/ethnicity as "other" anticipate that accessing a Support Network will continue to be as much as a challenge as it was during the pandemic.
- Both Native American/Alaska Native students and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students saw sharp increases in the proportion indicating that accessing a Support Network was "very challenging" during the pandemic relative to before the pandemic. However, while still higher than pre-pandemic levels, both groups have also shown sharp declines in the degree to which they believe access to a Support Network will be a challenge in the coming year.

Figure 18. Changes in the Challenge of Accessing a Support Network Access Over Time and by Race/ Ethnicity



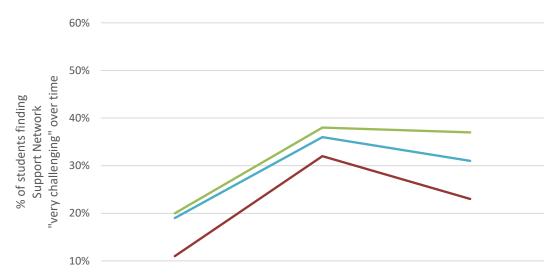
Breaking findings out by students' first-generation status reveals that first-generation students were consistently more likely to indicate that accessing a Support Network was "very challenging" to their transfer progress relative to non-first-generation students. First-generation students saw a slightly steeper rise in the percent of students indicating that accessing a Support Network was "very challenging" to their transfer progress from before the pandemic to during the pandemic. Looking ahead to the coming year, first-generation students are eight percentage points more likely than non-first-generation students to indicate that accessing a Support Network is "very challenging" to their transfer progress, compared to a five percentage point gap before the pandemic (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Changes in the Challenge of Accessing a Support Network Over Time and by First-Generation Status



Breaking findings out by students' age reveals that older students were consistently more likely to indicate that accessing a Support Network was "very challenging" to their transfer progress relative to younger students. However, students ages 18–25 saw the largest rise in the percentage of students indicating that accessing Support Network is "very challenging" to their transfer progress from before the pandemic to during the pandemic. As they look ahead to the coming year, students ages 18–25 and 26–49 were less likely than during the pandemic to indicate that accessing a Support Network will be "very challenging" to their transfer progress compared with students age 50+, who project this challenge continuing at the same level in the near future (see Figure 20).

Figure 20. Changes in the Challenge of Accessing a Support Network Access Over Time and by Age



0%	Before Pandemic	During Pandemic	Upcoming Year
——Age 18-25 (n=3,369)	11%	32%	23%
——Age 26-49 (n=2,183)	19%	36%	31%
——Age 50+ (n=242)	20%	38%	37%



STUDENT VOICES

Responses from both student focus groups, as well as open-ended survey items, revealed that the most common issue in accessing a strong Support Network during the pandemic was the lack of timely, reliable communication. Students reported that getting in touch with someone at the CCC often proved quite challenging. Students had to leave messages and play phone tag, and some professors and support personnel were unresponsive or did not respond in a timely manner.

In some instances, the inconsistent or lack of communication resulted in students missing of critical deadlines related to transfer. Some regarded this issue as simply the result of switching to remote school/work. However, others reported that some support services were explicitly reduced due to budget cuts at their college, so there were fewer resources available than before the pandemic. For example, while transfer center supports were made available remotely, many students could not make an appointment due to high demand. Two students explained in the focus groups:

For the transfer center, it's almost impossible to get an appointment. When you call them . . . their schedule is full. I tried many times. Any time I tried to contact them, [I was told the] appointments are full and to call another time, and waiting to connect to the transfer center takes almost one hour to speak with someone.

Right now, it is very difficult to communicate with staff members, so we rely on emails and other forms of communication. I think [the CCCs and universities] should emphasize communication and not assume [students] know all of the information.

Students reported higher levels of satisfaction with their level of connection and support when their colleges prioritized strong communication, including robust email communications and the use of social media. Students appreciated that they received information from different sources to help them stay up-to-date on important information and upcoming virtual events. Students who noted a strong Support Network during the pandemic also indicated that professors increased their communication with students and provided resources beyond the classroom, including information on food pantries and mental health services. These professors reached out to students to offer help, support, and academic accommodations. Programs and student centers on campus also provided information about resources and important deadlines. Two students described this support in the focus groups, stating:

I think [the CCC] did a really great job being active on social media and letting people know what kind of events they were having virtually. One big thing that I know was helpful to a lot of people was the food pantry that we have at our school. And I thought that was very useful, but I can say that we didn't really get . . . emails from [the CCC], and I wish that's something they would have done more because for people who don't have social media or aren't active [on social media], they wouldn't know about any of the events or study sessions that [the CCC is] offering.

My community college [was] on point with communication through emails. I received information and reminders every week, whether it [was] for financial aid or graduation. I really liked that. I also follow [the CCC] on social media, which helps. They are active on social media, so I'm receiving information in different places which really helps.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Student perspectives and experiences captured in the RP Group's statewide survey and follow-up focus groups confirm that the COVID-19 pandemic has understandably impacted students' transfer journeys. In many cases, the pandemic exacerbated key factors identified by our *Through the Gate* study as challenging students' transfer success, and in a subset of students, delayed their progress toward a bachelor's degree altogether.

Key conclusions and high-level recommendations are described below, organized by this study's four key research questions and integrating key equity considerations.¹⁷

Research Question 1. How were students' transfer plans affected by the pandemic?

Nearly two out of five high-leverage students indicated that the pandemic had impacted their transfer plans. Rates were highest among nonbinary, Native American/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students, and students ages 18–25. These impacts varied from changing pathways to delaying plans to canceling transfer plans altogether. Among students who had stopped attending their community college, nearly half indicated that their departure was directly due to the pandemic. Even among students who had been accepted for transfer, nearly one in 10 had either deferred their admission or had decided not to go. While no major differences existed by gender, age, or first-generation status, rates were highest among Middle Eastern/North African students and lowest among White students.

To help students get back on a path toward their bachelor's degree, colleges should reach out to students who have exited before transferring to determine what information and supports they need and connect them to appropriate resources and assistance.¹⁸

Research Question 2. What issues did students who were close to transfer face during the pandemic?

Nearly two out of five high-leverage students found it harder to access counselors and advisors during the pandemic, while one in three found it difficult to access both community college and university transfer center staff. Albeit a small sample, Native American/Alaska Native and nonbinary students were more likely than their peers to report this problem. Older students were also more likely than younger students to note difficulty accessing such transfer

¹⁷ Forthcoming research briefs will provide further analysis and recommendations.

¹⁸ EDITORIAL NOTE: Right now, recommendations are bolded to make them stand out – we will be asking our designer if she can make them stand out more though.

resources. While it is likely that the difficulty connecting with transfer professionals will wane once students are back on campus, colleges should consider ways to **increase the accessibility of online and/or hybrid transfer supports**. As many students referenced leaving voicemails and sending emails that went unanswered, colleges may want to consider **holding virtual office hours** where students are guaranteed to speak to someone live.

Further, regardless of whether students remain online or attend class in person, both colleges and universities must work towards increasing and improving communication, both utilizing multiple communication channels (e.g., email, social media platforms, college website) and ensuring information is clear, concise, comprehensive, and student-friendly. Since students voiced issues with communication on both the community college and university ends, this research suggests that all segments should work together to develop and articulate a shared sense of responsibility for increasing students' transfer outcomes, including using joint messaging, collaborating to host workshops and events, and ensuring each side is equipped to provide information to students about the other, should they need it.

Additionally, while students expressed appreciation for the flexibility shown by their colleges during the pandemic, some are concerned about their readiness for university-level coursework given the leniency demonstrated during the pandemic. This worry was especially articulated by those students in majors involving significant hands-on coursework (e.g., nursing, biology, art). Colleges considering delivering a significant proportion of their courses online should pay attention to monitoring and measuring learning outcomes to reassure students that the quality of the education they receive virtually aligns with in-person offerings. Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) offices should also consider tracking the longer-term outcomes of students who participate in virtual coursework compared to like in-person courses to monitor the effectiveness of these courses and share this information with students who may be hesitant to enroll in an online version of a class.

Research Question 3. What did students who were close to transfer know about changes that took place, both in the CCC and university segments, and how did they leverage these changes?

While the CCC, CSU, and UC systems each made numerous policy and practice adjustments to mitigate impacts of the pandemic on transfer students' progress toward a bachelor's degree, the majority of students (more than two-thirds) were not aware of such changes. Younger students were more likely than older students to be aware of the changes. Native American/Alaska Native and White students were least likely to know about the changes, pointing to the possibility that colleges made more explicit equity-focused efforts to ensure specific groups (i.e., African-American/Black, Hispanic/Latina/o/x students) received this information.

Further, even among those were aware, less than one in five students indicated that these changes improved their transfer experience. However, in focus groups and open-ended survey questions, students voiced that while they did not leverage these options, their availability served as a sort of safety net. Since students expressed a sense of comfort from the mere availability of these options, regardless of whether they needed to take advantage of them or not, CCCs, CSUs, and UCs must work in tandem to **improve messaging to students about the relaxed requirements**. While each system issued guidance memos to staff, this research underscores that more student-centered communications are needed.

Research Question 4. How are the four factors from the framework for building students' transfer capacity currently impacting students' transfer experience?

This study provided further confirmation that the factors identified through our *Through the Gate* research indeed impact students' capacity for transfer. Student survey results indicate that all four factors—University Affordability, School-Life Balance, Pathway Navigation, and Support Network—have a high degree of importance to their transfer progress and success.

Among all student groups, University Affordability was—and remains—students' top concern as they work toward transfer and consider the transition to university. This challenge intensified considerably during the pandemic; students' worries about paying for their education have only increased since the onset of the pandemic and are continuing on an upward trajectory. Qualitative data revealed that financial instability (e.g., decreased income and/or loss of employment, increased basic needs) is understandably fueling students' worries.

As economic conditions around the state are projected to worsen before they improve, transfer professionals (on both the CCC and university sides) should pay special attention to **providing students with relevant, timely information about (a) how much it will cost to attend university and (b) how to secure financial assistance for all expenses (e.g., tuition, books, housing, food), including—and beyond—financial aid. Such information should be shared early in CCC students' academic careers to help them make informed decisions about transfer. See the RP Group's report, Be a Transfer Advocate: How Student Support Professionals Can Help Transfer-Bound Students Address University Affordability Concerns¹⁹, produced in partnership with the Chief Student Services Officers Association, for ways both CCCs and universities can help students understand how to financially attain their bachelor's degree.**

Concerns about School-Life Balance also rose dramatically during the pandemic. The increased need to balance school with other life responsibilities (e.g., caregiving for family members,

¹⁹ https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/ThroughtheGate/TTG-StudentSupportProfessionalsResource.pdf?ver=2021-09-16-150205-103

homeschooling children) led to college taking a backseat for many students. Such challenges are trending downward slightly as students look toward the future, though they are still much higher than they were pre-pandemic. While many CCCs and universities are moving back to inperson instruction in the coming academic year, the proportion of students facing the challenge of managing their school-life balance will likely not recede until employment situations stabilize and vaccines are available for all ages. Both CCCs and universities should consider extending the flexibility that was offered during the pandemic long after they return to in-person instruction (and, as referenced in Research Question 3, ensuring that students know of such flexibility).

The challenges associated with Pathway Navigation and Support Network appear to be trending downward more quickly than University Affordability or School-Life Balance, and many of the issues associated with these factors will be reduced by the mere availability of on-campus instruction and service delivery. At the same time, students' concerns with these two factors are still substantially higher than they were pre-pandemic and thus worthy of attention. Further, colleges need to strategize ways to ensure students can receive supports related to University Affordability and School-Life Balance, including ways to deliver support to students who remain in a virtual learning environment.

Inadequate, opaque, and spotty communication from community colleges and universities alike is a central driver of students' Pathway Navigation and Support Network issues. Students expressed frustration with the absence of reliable, timely information and connection to people and functions. Given the persistent issues around communication expressed by students both in this current research and the *Through the Gate* study, all college personnel can play a role in supporting students toward their transfer goal—transfer professionals, counselors and advisors, staff, and faculty alike. **CCCs and universities should work in partnership to develop timely, reliable, streamlined communications that ensure students have a warm handoff from one phase of their educational journey to the next.**

Given their direct and regular connection with students, instructional faculty have the unique opportunity to **embed transfer planning and information on resources and support in the classroom and across the academic program experience**. See the RP Group's <u>Be a Transfer Advocate: How Faculty Can Strengthen Students' Transfer Success</u> for specific suggestions, developed in partnership with the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges and based on students' own ideas.

Further, the RP Group's research suggests that students must also be their *own* transfer advocates as colleges both grapple with limited capacity to address students' transfer support needs and/or redesign transfer systems, policies, and practices in student-centered, equity-minded ways. We recommend CCCs and universities empower students to take action early and often throughout their community college experience to address University Affordability

issues, manage School-Life Balance, understand Pathway Navigation, and develop a Support Network as they work toward their bachelor's degree goal.²⁰

Research Question 5. What differences exist in student groups' experience of the four factors over the course of the pandemic?

When exploring differences in how student groups experienced each of the four factors over time, some notable differences emerged. Students who were no longer enrolled due to the pandemic were more likely to find each of the four factors "very challenging"—even before the pandemic hit. These students were also more likely to indicate that balancing school and life responsibilities, navigating their transfer pathway, and accessing a support network during the pandemic were "very challenging." However, students who successfully transferred during this period also experienced similarly increased rates. These findings point to the notion that it was not the pandemic itself that resulted in a negative outcome, but rather that students already struggling with these issues were not able to weather the intensified challenges of the pandemic as well as those who were less challenged before the pandemic.

Students who identify as gender nonbinary have consistently experienced the four factors as more challenging than males and females, yet the pandemic exacerbated such issues to an unprecedented degree. While relatively small in sample size, this finding cannot be overlooked. Transfer counselors at CCCs may consider partnering with campus and community LGBTQ+ programs and organizations to increase the likelihood that nonbinary students are receiving the supports they need. Further, while prior research indicated that females were more likely than males to rate the four factors as challenging to their transfer success, the gaps between females and males are considerably wider now than before the pandemic, most notably in the area of School-Life Balance. As many survey respondents noted, taking care of children whose own school remained virtual, was particularly problematic. It will be important to track the degree to which the issue of School-Life Balance wanes for females and/or what additional factors persist as K–12 schools return to in-person instruction.

With respect to race/ethnicity, patterns vary by factor. University Affordability remains especially challenging for Hispanic/Latina/o/x students. Middle Eastern/North African students experienced a significant jump in the degree to which both University Affordability and School-Life Balance challenge their transfer progress. For students who identify their race as "other," school life balance has steadily increased as a challenge pre-pandemic to now. Lastly, for East Asian students, Pathway Navigation is an increasing challenge, despite the fact that most other racial/ethnic groups are showing a decline as the pandemic wanes. As CCCs vary considerably

²⁰ Be Your Own Transfer Advocate – Steps to Take from Day 1 (forthcoming 2021) will outline specific actions students can take to address the four factors for building their own transfer capacity across key unit milestones.

with respect to their demographic makeup, we expect they will tailor supports accordingly to best suit the diverse experiences and needs of their student populations.

First-generation students consistently experienced each of the four factors as more challenging than non-first-generation students before and during the pandemic, as well as in the coming year. In the areas of Pathway Navigation and Support Network, the gap in the proportion of first-generation and non-first-generation students indicating these factors as a challenge has grown slightly since before the pandemic to now. Thus, it will be important to **ensure adequate attention is paid to supporting first-generation students in these areas in the coming year(s).**

Lastly, the degree to which students experienced challenges related to each of the four factors varied as a function of age. In general, each of these factors was noted as more of a challenge over all time points among older students relative to younger students. With respect to University Affordability, as they look ahead to the coming year, both students ages 18–25 and 50+ are more likely than ever to indicate that University Affordability is "very challenging" to their transfer progress. Conversely, in the areas of School-Life Balance, students ages 18–25 saw a dramatic rise in the degree to which this factor was a challenge during the pandemic, though they are rebounding quickly in this area. Older students are seeing School-Life Balance as being more of a challenge than ever as they look ahead to the coming year. While the survey did not ask respondents about their parental status, it is possible that this variable plays a role in students experiencing challenges during the pandemic. As the federal administration has the goal of bringing all K–12 public schools back in person beginning in fall 2021—in conjunction with the potential rollout of the vaccine for younger children around this same time—it will be important to track the degree to which this challenge abates as the academic year progresses.

Looking Ahead

While the immediate threat of the COVID-19 pandemic is waning, the long-term impacts are only beginning to emerge. This report offers the first glimpse into the challenges faced by high-leverage students as they attempted to navigate transfer during the pandemic. It is the hope that these findings will begin to shed light on the supports these students will need in the immediate and long term to remain or get back on track. However, it will be critical to monitor their progress in the coming years to ensure they are equipped with the tools and supports necessary to be as successful—if not more so—than their peers before them, and that the ripple effects of the pandemic do not widen equity gaps. In fact, it is the hope that the lessons learned about how to best serve transfer-motivated, high-leverage students—even under the most strained of circumstances—can be leveraged to close such gaps.

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Appendix A: Participating Colleges

Alameda Hartnell Porterville

American River Imperial Reedley

Bakersfield Irvine Riverside

Barstow Los Angeles City Sacramento City

Berkeley City Los Angeles Mission San Bernardino

Cabrillo Los Angeles Pierce San Diego City

Cañada Los Angeles Southwest San Diego Mesa

Cerrittos Los Angeles Trade San Diego Miramar

Cerro Coso Los Angeles Valley San Francisco

Chaffey Laney San Mateo

Citrus Long Beach Santa Ana

Clovis Madera Santa Barbara

Columbia Merritt Santa Monica

Compton Mission Sierra

Cuesta Modesto Skyline

Cypress Monterey Southwestern

Desert Moorpark Ventura

East Los Angeles Moreno Valley West Los Angeles

El Camino Mt. San Antonio Woodland

Feather River Mt. San Jacinto Yuba

Fresno City Norco

Fullerton Oxnard

Grossmont Pasadena

Appendix B: Additional Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Table B1. Method of Paying for Education

	%*	#
Financial Aid	73.8	4,466
Loans	16.0	967
Self	57.6	3,481
Parent/Guardian	23.4	1,416
Decline to State	2.2	134

^{*}Percentages add up to more than 100%, as participants could select all that apply.

Awards Received

Across the entire sample, 39% of respondents had already received some type of college award (e.g., certificate, degree), while 31% of those who had not yet transferred had done so. Table B2 shows:

- Among those who had received an award, 43% had earned an Associate Degree for Transfer (AD-T), while 54% had received an Associate Degree of Arts (AA) or Science (AS).
- Among those who had received an award but had yet to transfer, 30% had already earned an AD-T.

Table B2. Awards Received by Transfer Status

	All Students % #		Students Who Have Not Yet Transferred		Students Who Have Transferred	
			%	#	%	#
Certificate	40.1	1,223	48.7	961	24.4	262
Associate Degree of Arts or Science	54.1	1,650	52.7	1,040	56.7	610
Associate Degree for Transfer (AD-T)	42.6	1,299	29.9	589	66.0	710

When only looking at associate degrees, across the entire sample, 30% of respondents had received either an AA or and AD-T. As can be seen in Table B3, among students who had transferred to university, 69% had earned an AA/AS or AD-T, while 31% transferred without an associate degree.

Table B3. AD-T or AA/AS Degrees Earned by Transfer Status

Have You Received an AA/AS	All Students			Who Have ransferred	Students Who Have Transferred	
or AD-T to Date?	%	#	%	#	%	#
Yes	30.4	2,392	21.4	1,368	69.3	1,024
No	69.6	5,476	78.6	5,023	30.7	453

Awareness of AD-T

Further exploration into students' awareness of the AD-T revealed that approximately one in five students are not aware of the AD-T options at their institution. This finding holds when looking across all students (18%), as well as when splitting by transfer status (both groups 18%), as well as only for students who do not already have an AD-T (19%).

Table B4. Awareness of the AD-T

Are You Aware of the Associate Degree for Transfer Options at Your	All St	udents	Have Not Yet Ha		Have Not Yet Have		Students Who Do Not Already Have an AD-T (Regardless of transfer status)	
Institution?	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
Yes	81.8	5,930	81.7	4,992	82.4	938	81.0	5,294
No	18.2	1,321	18.3	1,121	17.6	200	19.0	1,240

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges

The RP Group strengthens the ability of California Community Colleges to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

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